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Moment of Truth for U.S. and India

Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit gives the Reagan administration a unique opportunity to improve relations between the world's two largest democracies. But the president's men must discard some long-cherished misconceptions about India if a solid relationship is to be achieved.

First and foremost, President Reagan must realize that Gandhi offers the hand of friendship as an equal, not as a client. Like his grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, and his mother, Indira Gandhi, he is a dedicated nationalist for whom India's interests are always paramount. Gandhi is determined not to play second fiddle to either the United States or the Soviet Union.

For all the political differences between the two countries, Indians and Americans are remarkably alike: irreverent, self-critical, harboring a healthy distrust of big government. And Gandhi's economic reforms and tax cuts have drawn unabashed admiration from members of the Reagan administration.

The United States is India's single biggest trading partner. Nearly half a million Americans trace their ancestry to India, and thousands of Indians are studying in American colleges. Educational and cultural exchanges are at a record high, epitomized by the Festival of India now being celebrated in 100 U.S. cities.

The only serious point of difference is in geopolitics: U.S. global strategy often collides head-on with India's regional ambitions. With 740 million people, the world's third largest standing army and 10th largest industrial output, self-sufficient in food and boasting a successful space program and a rapidly growing high-technology sector, India wants to be South Asia's superpower.

In pursuit of this goal, India has proclaimed its own version of the Monroe Doctrine: neither the Soviet Union nor the United States should "colonize" the region with military bases and arms supplies that threaten the existing strategic balance in the subcontinent.

Unfortunately, ever since the 1950s, Washington has provided sophisticated weapons to a succession of Pakistani dictators, whose armies have turned their American-made arms against India in three wars. The Nixon administration's "tilt" toward Pakistan in the 1970 crisis over Bangladesh left U.S.-Indian relations at their lowest. It was U.S. military aid to Pakistan that led India to seek the friendship of the Soviet Union.

The flow of U.S. weapons to Pakistan has increased since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But most of these sophisticated fighter planes, missiles and antitank guns are deployed against India, not against the Soviet threat, intelligence sources told our associate Indy Badhwar.

Diplomats in both countries agree that the "Pakistan problem" must be solved before any real improvement in U.S.-Indian relations can occur.

Administration sources suggest that the initiative is India's, that Gandhi should seek a regional alliance with Pakistan to thwart Soviet expansion in the subcontinent. But other analysts think the United States should make the first move by refusing to give Pakistan any more weapons that are obviously intended for use against India.

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